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ABSTRACT

This paper provides historical background on the Jews in Russia and relates the development of children's literature to historical events and situations such as the discriminatory national policy of Tsarism, the fall of Tsarism and the abolishment of discrimination, the political repression of the 1930s, World War II, and Stalin's anti-Jewish campaign. The work of several authors, including Sholom-Aleichem, Lev Kvitko, and Ovsei Driz, is highlighted. (MES)

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Jewish heritage in Russian children's literature

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Paper

When I was invited to speak about Jewish heritage in Russian children's literature, I was firstly taken aback and didn't know what to answer. On the one hand a considerable part of Russian children's writers are Jews: Samuil Marshak - a founder of modern Russian children's literature, a man who considerably influenced it's development and brought up several generations of writers; wonderful poets - Jakov Akhim, Genrich Sapgir, Viktor Lunin, Junna Moritz; famous writers - Viktor Dragunsky, Anatoly Aleksin - just to name everyone will take all my time. Our literature is traditionally multinational, writers of dozens various nationalities have contributed to it's creation - Armenians, Byelorussians, Kalmyks, Ukrainians. They have accepted and developed traditions of Russian classical literature, but also brought their own national spirit as their contribution. A precious gift! So I don't want to fish up different national motives from the common trend.

Let's try to approach the problem in another way. As the saying goes, language is writer's motherland. Language is a magical crystal of every national literature. It is known that alongside with a great Russian literature, there were and are literatures in national languages, among others - Jewish.

What is known about children's Jewish literature in Russia? Alas! It appeared to be almost nothing. Books supply one with rather contradictory information, encyclopedias suggested just a short list of names, and bibliographies confined to the articles dated by 1920-30-ies. And after?

I have been also a little bit embarrassed to speak on the topic, as I am not a Jew, and so lack some important experience and knowledge others inherit from their

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parents. But in Russia we do say that a Jew sits in nearly every intellectual: in a course of time everything has so mixed up and interlaced in our culture, in our life, in our mind.

I turned for help to my friends - librarians, children's writers, and literary critics. As a real detective I was looking for every scrap of evidence, I wanted to talk to people who were brought up on this literature. Soon I got some useful telephone numbers and started my investigation.

- Darling, it was a great literature! - shouted into a receiver (by telephone) Sonja Chernjak, a retired editor of "Sovietish Heymland", a magazine that was published in Yiddish in Soviet times. - The Jews have always cherished their traditions and that has saved us. We are ancient people, those who entered history together with us - Egyptians, Sumers, and Romans - where are they? Only Jews have survived because they cherished their traditions. It's a pity you've phoned too late, you should talk to..., but now some are dead, others have emigrated, nobody is left...

"Nobody is left..." - that sad refrain appeared in every conversation. I began to feel myself investigating a mysterious continent, like Atlantis, famous for it's past, that, alas, remain only in legends.

- It's impossible that nothing remains! - kept I repeating myself.

Sholom-Aleichem, Lev Kvitko, Ovsei Driz - whom were they writing for? Who were their readers?

The thick volumes on Jewish cultural history suggested rather contradictory information, a great part of which wasn't proved by the witnesses. But gradually a wonderful melody began to appear from this informational chaos - a Jewish tune. I've found what I was looking for! At last!

And now let me share with you my modest achievements.

Let's start with some facts from the history of Jews in Russia.

The Jews lived in Russia for many centuries. They were always considered aliens and were always persecuted for their faith. Their rights were always restricted. For centuries denationalisation and assimilation were the twin features of Tsarist policy towards national minorities. The "Jewish problem" got extra weight in 19th century when after the annexation of Polish territories the number of Jews in Russia considerably increased.

It was at that time that new discriminative laws, prescribing the Jews to settle only in limited number of territories - so called "pale of settlement" - were issued. Only a few Jews could redeem the right to live in big towns and choose "noble" professions - a doctor, a lawyer, a manufacture, a tradesman. The right of Jewish children to study in Russian schools was restricted to a tiny percentage -numerus clausus. Samuil Marshak wrote in his memoirs that at the age of ten he was denied to enter a gymnasium, though he had successfully passed all exams. Jewish population in the pale of settlement, in so called townlets lived in poverty and crowded conditions. The only education available to most of the Jewish children was a primary religious school - kheder.

One should say that discriminative national policy of Tsarism was directed against all national minorities, but only in the case of the Jews it turned into a barbaric cruel form of "pogroms", massacre inspired by Tsarist's government and

Orthodox church . Anti-Jewish prejudices and activity in Russia always emanated from the centre of power. Several waves of "pogroms" that took place in Russia at the turn of the century caused indignation and protests of the pillars of Russian culture - writes Leo Tolstoy, Nikolaj Leskov, Maksim Gorki, Vladimir Korolenko and philosophers Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolay Berdyaev - blamed the cruelty and protested against inhuman policy of the state.

But discriminative laws could not stop the development of Jewish culture. In the 19-th century Jewish literature was bilingual: enlighteners made attempts to revive Hebrew and democrats turned to Yiddish - the spoken language of common people. In towns developed Russian-Jewish literature.

The first Jewish children's books were of a didactic character: textbooks or adaptations of religious texts. The entertaining books appeared later. In 1849 in Russia was published a reading book in Hebrew "Alphabet or Upbringing of Youth" which included stories about children, tales and verse. The main centres for children's publishing were Warsaw, Vilno, and Odessa. There were published series of Jewish tales (series "All Tales of Israel" 1894) and stories for children. Among authors of that time one can name I.Levner (humorous stories), Sh.Berman (biographies of national heroes) A.Ljuboshitski (songs for children). The first children's newspaper in Hebrew appeared in Viino at the beginning of the century. Some writers for adults wrote also for children - Khaim Nahman Bialik, S.Ben-Tsion, D.Frishman etc.

But books in Hebrew couldn't reach young readers who didn't know that language as their mother tongue was Yiddish. Though few children's books in Yiddish met also great obstacles on their way to readers. Rich people tried to send their children to Russian schools as that gave them better starting positions for future life. Schools in Jewish townlets where poor people lived gave only a minimum of knowledge and children's books were rare and even unwelcomed guests there. The gloomy atmosphere of this schools is described in the books of Sholom-Aleihem (Teacher Boim, The Flag, The Top), Lev Kvitko (Lyam and Petrik) and in the memoirs of Mark Shagall.

So the circle where Jewish children's literature did exist before the Revolution was very little, and it's educational influence on young generation was insignificant. Though it was the time when Jewish children's literature established it's place in a national cultural heritage. It's founder was Sholom-Aleichem, who created wonderful images of Jewish children.

The writer presented the world of a Jewish child with sympathy and respect. His little heroes - Sholom himself, Mottel and his friends, Shmulik - are mischievous and full of inventions and tricks. Their life is not bed of roses, they learn poverty and suffer hardship, but remain optimists. "I'm lucky, I'm an orphan" keeps on saying Mottel and bravely shares the fate of his family and meets all trails and tribulations. Many children's stories of Sholom-Aleihem are predominantly sad: the tragic death of a broken-down old horse that belonged to the water-carrier, the sickness into which under the pressure of his conscience declined the boy who had stolen a penknife, the evil trick that ruined boy's happiness as his new flag was burnt on a holy day.

Jewish children learn at an early age that life is real, life is earnest and a good time is not it's goal. A modern reader could decide that little heroes are deprived of childhood, their life is thrown in one lot with the adult's, there is no place in it for fairy tales and careless plays, from an early age they have to help their parents. All of the children are religious and they live in the framework of ritual, following the life pattern of their parents. Children's fantasy grows not on

fairy-tales but on religious and mystical believes: they do not play fairies and princess, but are looking for a buried treasure that could be reached by masters of Kabbalah. Relationship with parents lack sentimentality. Fathers and mothers do not have cosy conversations with their children, a box on the ear, a slap, a moralistic admonition are the main pedagogical devices. Nevertheless parents pay great attention to children's education, the aim of which is not only literacy but also religious knowledge and learning of national traditions. On one hand the writer shows ignorance and cruelty of teachers, called by pupils "the Murderer" or "The Death-Angel", as punishment was their main pedagogical principle: teaching without flogging was simply unthinkable. On the other hand he shows the respect the Jews have for education, for the book. The father of the young hero of the story "The Penknife" reproaches him for laziness: "The hooligan! Eight years old if a day, and doesn't know enough to sit down quietly with a holy book! You empty-headed little loafer!"

Sholom Aleihem managed to express variety of national character, his heroes are not passive poverty-stricken people, they are longing for happiness and preserve their national dignity. They do not loose their hearts in the most difficult situations, and keep on believing that "it's all for the best". Kind humour and subtle irony that are characteristic features of Sholom Aleihem's have been inherited by Jewish literature.

The fall of Tsarism caused considerable changes in the life of Jews. The provisional government abolished national and religious discrimination and made Jews full citizens. The policy of emancipation was followed by Bolsheviks. Jews as all other national minorities were granted all civil rights. The political improvements contributed to the development of Jewish culture and literature and especially for the preservation of Yiddish as a vehicle of literary expression. At the same time the democratic national policy after the Revolution went hand in hand with anti-religious campaign. Churches and synagogues were closed. It soon became clear that in order to enjoy their newly won emancipation, Jews, as indeed all others, had to abandon most of their traditions, customs and beliefs. So the new Soviet Jewish culture had been cut from it's most important source - ancient faith. Culture and religion of the past were proclaimed by Bolsheviks to be "bourgeois" and "harmful".

But the vast majority of young Jews no longer bound by traditional piety embraced revolution with dedicated enthusiasm: a number of them burst into songs and become it's troubadours (Itzi Harik, Itzik Fefer, David Hofsteyn, Zelik Akselrod). The writers of older generation after coping with ideological crisis, as critics named it, returned to literary activity (Peretz Markish, Dovid Bergelson, Der Nister). The Yiddish literature began to develop rapidly. Some people name the short interval between two wars the golden age of Jewish literature.

A young poet Aron Kushnirov, a soldier in the Red Army, expressed his attitude to the changes in the life of his people:

> ...I do not own, even in a dream, a land of honey and milk. In my soul a little mouse is scraping - father's and grandfather's tune, but the door of my own Sabbath the week has sealed with a star.

Young generation left old settlements, moved to cities, to the big constructing sites and assimilated rapidly. Many Jews got involved in the social and political life. The number of Jewish schools grew rapidly (in 1930 there were 160,000 pupils in them), as well as the number of publications - books and periodicals. State Jewish theatres were organized in various parts of Soviet Union. There were many that considered it to be a real long-awaited renaissance of national

culture. A book of an American Leon Dennen "Where the Ghetto Ends" was published in New York in 1934, the journalist visited Soviet Russia and got exited by the life of Russian Jews. The author reports such data: there are about 30 Yiddish newspapers and periodicals in Russia as well as a number of children's periodicals, that have a circulation of more than 400,000 copies.

Bolsheviks proclaimed their main goal creation of a new culture - national by form and socialist by content. What does that mean? In the case of literature, t.ex., it meant literature on a national language, but representing communist ideas.

A remarkable story told me one of my witnesses - Maya Isaakovna Rodak. In 1927 her parents who were teachers in a Jewish gymnasium in Riga came to Russia inspired by the faith that it was the country of a real Jewish renaissance. Firstly the family settled in Kiev, the girl attended a Jewish nursery-garden, then a Jewish school. At that time there also existed Jewish colleges and Jewish departments in many institutes. The father taught Yiddish in a Jewish school and was among the authors of an Yiddish textbook. Maya Rodak remembered that all teaching was in Yiddish and there were taught also Jewish literature and history, but the content of teaching didn't differ from that in other schools - Russian or Ukranian. So in that case one had also carried out the same principle - education national by form and socialist by content. The level of education was high, children were also taught Russian, Ukranian and German. But did the pupils feel themselves the heirs of the ancient cultural traditions of their ancestors? I suppose they didn't. Children of 20-ies and 30-ties felt themselves soviet, they didn't mind national differences. "What songs did you sing?" - asked I Maya Isaakovna. "The same as other children: about the Red banner and pioneer's life". The bright socialist future, children had prepared themselves to, should have no division into nations and all children were brought up as builders of communism. That was called teaching of internationalism. Children did believe in happy and secure future and didn't look round into the past.

Successful teaching of internationalism as well as crucial changes in state policy caused in the late 30-ies a decline of national schools. Maya Rodak told that in 1934 her family moved to Odessa where at that time were 17 Jewish schools, but in 1937 there remained only one which in spite of the high level of education was no more popular with pupils and parents. Maya Rodak remembered how she with her schoolmates, members of the young communist's link, visited Jewish families and agitated them to send children to the Jewish school but in vain. The adults refused and said: "Do you want to send us back to ghetto?". "So Jewish schools had extinct by themselves", drew a conclusion my witness.

But as long as they did exist Jewish children's literature in Russia had unique possibilities for development: the number of editions had considerably increased, as well as the number of young readers. Writers of the pre-Revolutionary times couldn't even dream about that.

Many Jewish writers made their contribution to children's literature in Yiddish: I.Gutyanski, A.Plater, Itzik Kipnis, Der Nister. Unfortunately most of their works were never translated into other languages and nowadays are forgotten. The real popularity achieved only two poets - Lev Kvitko (1890/93-1952) and Ovsei Driz (1908-1971). Both had got traditional Jewish education, both welcomed political changes in the country and honestly believed in communist ideals, but both preserved the Jewish heritage and represented it in their work. While being socialist by form, they, though in a different way, were national by content, by their mentality.

Their verse was translated by the most talentd Russian translators, by the best children's poets - Samuil Marshak, Mikhail Svetlov, Elena Blaginina, Roman Sef, Genrih Sapgir. I think that each translation is a unique work - a result of a cooperation between the poet and the translator, who is in love with the original text. The skillful translations made Kvitko and Driz popular and loved with young readers of various nationalities. The poets had a great success with Russian audience, they managed to bring a Jewish tune in Russian children's literature.

Lev Kvitko's first children's books appeared in 1920-ies. Only in 1928 there were published 17 his books. Kvitko wrote also for adults, but it was children's verse that brought him fame. At the time of great deeds when all considerable and great was appraised, when art and literature turned to global problems and spoke about World Revolution in "a rough language of slogan" (Mayakovski) poetry of Lev Kvitko attracted by it's intimacy, it's sincere consideration for the tiny aspects of life - for the young trees in the rain, for the lonely fur-tree proud, that the forest take it's beginning with her, for the brave bug that escaped from the frog... Even for political rhymes the poet managed to find sincere human intonation, which is t.ex. characteristic for one of the most famous Kvitko's poems - Letter to Voroshilov, where a young boy with touching naturalness writes to formidable Red general about his wish to become a soldier.

A rare skill to see great in small and ability to share one's discoveries with readers are signs of a real talent. Kvitko wrote for the very young children - from 3 to 7, his verse is very lyrical, he speaks rather about feelings than about events, and that is not typical for children's poetry, which prefers playfulness and entertainment.

Could we find Jewish roots in Kvitko's verse? At first sight Kvitko's poems doesn't differ from the rest of soviet poetry for children. But that is only the first impression. Kvitko's verse is marked by richness of language, which is deeply rooted in national tradition, in Jewish folklore. The poems are full of kind humour and irony as well as of sympathy and love. The poet admires his young heroes, they are the source of joy and optimism for him - and that also reflects a national attitude to children. In the course of history vanished peculiar way of life typical for Jewish townlets, religious traditions had been doomed to neglect and sank into oblivion but the soul of nation survived and sparkles in verse, contributing to it's charm.

Kvitko's attitude to motherland, to native home is also peculiar. For him - a Jew, a representative of the persecuted nation - Soviet Russia became a country where dreams had come true, where his people had gained equality and freedom. The feeling that one is the master of everything, that surrounding world belongs to you makes the poet to admire the tiny features of this world and feel his own responsibility for it. He is like a man who has returned home from a long exile and recognize with admiration tiny scraps of familiar world.

Ovsej Driz approaches national theme in another way. His first books of verse appeared in 1930-ies, but his literary carrier was unusual. In 1934 he entered the Red Army, served on the Western boarder, and returned to literature only in late 50-ies. His first poems for adults were inspired by revolutionary romanticism. His first book for children A Joyfull Baker was published in 1959 in Russian translation and was succeeded by others. The Yiddish originals were published several years later. For many years the poet kept his poems waiting for better days, and so they sprouted as magic seeds and gave wonderful flowers.

Driz' poetry is based on a play, on a tale. His heroes are little fidgets who live

both in reality and in fairy-world where all miracles are possible. Children appear to be main magicians - their imagination can turn soap bubbles into clouds, a little box - into fairy kingdom and a bug - into a king!

The Jewish tune is more obvious in Ovsei Driz' verse: a reader gets aquatinted with several generations of a big Jewish family, could read poetical interpretations of ancient legends. A book "Wise Men from Khelom" creates a poetical image of the past. Stories and poems from that book are full of nostalgia for the world that vanished for ever, they tell about difficult but full of peculiar beauty life of the old Jewish townlet and a constant hope for better days cherished by it's inhabitants.

> Once upon a time there was an old town. As any town it was mostly inhabited by unlucky people. Nothing they put their hands to turned out well... But every morning they woke up with a new hope: may be today the luck will knock at their door. Days passed but everything remained as it was.
>
> But one day a local stargazer announced:
>
> - Butterflies of hope are flying to our town! At midday they'll settle to rest on the town's square. Each of you who'll manage to cover with his hat at least one butterfly could hope that his wish will be granted.
>
> At the daybreak next day people hurried to the square. Everyone had a hat and looked into the sky. At last a light colorful cloud appeared in the distance. It stopped above the town and butterflies started to settle: red, blue, green, and yellow. As if a rainbow descended on the ground.
>
> People sighed from astonishment. In a moment the square was covered with hats. It became so silent that one could hear the clouds floating in the sky. The town caught it's breath. Everyone waited who would dear to raise his hat first. For if you raise your hat, the butterfly could fly away. So the hats remained lying on the town's square.
>
> I like my hat very much. But every time I put it on, I feel a little bit sad - there is no trace of a long ago lost butterfly in it.

A sad tales leads us to the sad pages of our story. From late 30-ies the policy of Soviet government towards Jews changes. One begins to consider everything national to be nationalist and so harmful. Political repressions of the 30-ies, the tragedy of war, anti-Jewish campaign that was unleashed by Stalin after the war - have buried all illusions. Best representatives of Jewish culture were exterminated. Lev Kvitko was executed in 1952.

One should admit with pity that neither political thaw of post-Stalin period nor official state promises could stop the mechanism of anti-Semitism that had been started once again. Butterflies have flown away...

Before the war Jews in Soviet Union could feel themselves equally "soviet" as the rest of population, but after the Catastrophe and post-war repressions, after revival of anti-Semitic sentiments in the society, after experiencing isolation and hostility, they again have felt themselves - Jews and aliens. Russian-Jewish poet Boris Slutsky wrote:

> As I mature and grow older

I regain myself as a Jew...

Once I've stepped with one foot

In a kind of recognition or citizenship,

And now I return to native rootlessness

I return from the point into universe.

The revival of national self-awareness as reaction to oppression aroused interest to national Jewish heritage and at the same time caused straightening of the official national policy. A new goal was officially announced - total denationalization of the society and creation of the united nation - soviet people. New government policy was aimed against all national minorities, and to great extent this social utopia lead to the disintegration of the great multinational state - the USSR - that we all have witnessed recently.

The Jewish theme have been for many years denied official recognition and have been driven back too the margins of cultural life, it could exist mainly in the underground literature and art, or in folklore and anecdotes. The echo of it could be traced in the works of Russian-Jewish authors, for children's literature their names are - Max Bremener, Alexandra Brunshtein, Anatoly Rybakov and a few others. But young readers were no longer naive and an funny question of a hero of a book by Lev Kassil, a little boy who just got to know that there were different nations and he and his relatives were Jews and wanted to know whether their cat was a Jew, too, was met with a sad smile.

Fortunately culture has a unique ability for preservation and revival. The Jewish tune remains in Russian culture, though it is not so loud as before. Unfortunately the revival of classical Jewish culture that have started recently in Russia is orientated on Hebrew traditions and neglects the Yiddish literature of the soviet past. I do believe that this part of national heritage deserves investigation and I hope it will find it's guardians and researchers.

I wish to end my paper by one more tale of Ovsei Driz.

> One day a philosopher from Khelom had found a beautiful bookmark in an old volume - it was a picture of a very beautiful town embroidered with beads. It was not London or Rome, it was - Khelom! The philosopher shared his discovery with other wise men: in past times there town was made of beards! Such a beauty! But the wise men got upset, somebody had deprived them from their wonderful past. The only witness of the former existence of the town of beards appeared to be a little mouse that preserved two black beads - for it's eyes. The thieves didn't find the mice in the dark cellar.

Two black beads - is that all our heritage? Or is it just a reminder that the time to judge and to divide has past. My paper has been devoted to the fate of Jewish heritage in my land, but the problem is wider, and that is not "a Jewish problem". Interaction of cultures, multiculturalism are the important features of the modern world. We turn to the experience of the past to solve contemporary problems. A Jewish poet Shmuel Halkin wrote:

> The glass of my window is transparent and clean - through it you see the whole world: who weeps and who laughs. But when one side of it is covered with silver paint, worth of a penny or a little more - the entire earth

disappears from view, and from the clean glass becomes a mirror; and no matter how clean the mirror, you see in it only yourself.

Let's more often look through the window into the outer world!

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